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## THE VIRGIN BIRTH CONTROVERSY— A LUTHERAN'S REACTION

The Mariological Society of America has done me a signal honor in inviting me for the second time to address an annual convention of the Society, and I am profoundly grateful.

I am not less grateful that the title of my essay as given to me, *The Virgin Birth Controversy—A Lutheran's Reaction*, is generously broad. Yet it does confront me with a problem.

It is not a question of my denomination. I am obviously a Lutheran, and therefore a Catholic.

The problem, at least as I see it, is that this assembly is not really interested in a Lutheran's reaction to the virgin birth controversy in the Roman Catholic Church. I should imagine that in this age of ecumenical theological convergence this assembly is more interested in the reaction of the Lutheran community than in the reaction of a single theologian.

Here I face a series of difficulties.

The first is that the virgin birth controversy in the Roman Catholic Church has not evoked in the Lutheran community any significant or informed printed comment that I could discover. Thus I shall have to construct from available sources what the Lutheran reaction to the virgin birth controversy might be.

This carries with it my second difficulty. Like the Roman Catholic community, the Lutheran community is an international one, with the national differences of which Roman Catholics are aware in their church accentuated in ours by the fact that the Lutheran Church is not as centralized. Within individual countries there is also a considerable degree of variation. This is true in countries where there is only one Lutheran church; it is even more true in countries where there are several Lutheran church-bodies. Thus there are not only dif-

ferences, say, among the Lutheran communities of Sweden and Denmark and Germany and India and Tanzania and the United States, but there are also differences within the Lutheran community in each of these countries.

The third difficulty lies in the fact that while Lutherans generally—and all the major Lutheran bodies in North America specifically—are committed to the doctrinal content of the Book of Concord, the collection of symbolical books of the Lutheran Church, there are variations in interpretation and in intensity of commitment. By the same token, the methods of insuring actual conformity with the doctrinal content of the Book of Concord vary likewise. In Europe, particularly in Germany, where the links between the "Evangelical" theological faculties of the universities and the territorial churches are sometimes very tenuous, a teacher in an "Evangelical" theological faculty may acknowledge no obligation to teach in accordance with the doctrinal standards of the territorial church within whose limits the university is located.

With special reference to the United States, I have to observe that the virginal conception of our Lord is not a significantly controverted doctrine. The recent volume by Merton P. Strommen, Milo L. Brekke, Ralph C. Underwager, and Arthur L. Johnson, *A Study of Generations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), is described as providing "the first published results of the most comprehensive scientific study ever made of a religious group in the United States." Over a two-year period a carefully selected representative sample of 5,000 Lutherans from all synodical affiliations between the ages of 16 and 65 were queried on their beliefs, their values, their attitudes, and their behavior.

One item to which they were invited to respond read: "Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary without a human father." Of the doctrinal items in the survey this was one of the five held most firmly. Of those queried, 40% agreed strongly and felt that persons who disbelieve



this tenet are not true to the Christian faith. Another 25% agreed, but did not regard exact agreement as essential. As a case in point, it was observed that St. Paul and the Fourth Gospel do not mention the virgin birth. Partial agreement was voiced by 22%; they held that Jesus was divine, but that his divinity is better expressed by the Johannine assertion that the Word of God became flesh than by the virgin birth. Thus the total voicing agreement was 87% of those queried. Only 8% held that Jesus is the supreme revelation of God to men, but that he was conceived like anyone else; indeed, they felt, every child is divinely conceived in a sense. A very small 2% disagreed strongly and declared that if Jesus ever lived at all, he was conceived like everyone else, and that the "virgin birth" is a folk tale that grew up to explain a great man. Those who did not respond to the item totaled 3% of the sample (pp. 111, 379).

Published evidence that the virgin conception of our Lord is controverted among Lutherans in the United States is almost nonexistent. The exception is the controversy about the doctrinal position of the Seminary at which I teach. Among the charges that the president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod claimed to have received were allegations that some members of the faculty of Concordia Seminary denied the virgin conception of our Lord. He appointed a five-man commission to investigate the theological position of the faculty. Their inquiry resulted in a finding that no member of the faculty denied the virgin conception and birth of our Lord; significant variation existed among faculty members only on the ways in which denial of Christ's virginal conception was to be dealt with pastorally. I shall return to the details of this inquiry later.

In this paper I propose, first of all, to survey some of the available recent Lutheran literature on the subject. I shall try as far as possible to avoid duplicating the material offered by Joaquín María Alonso in part I of his *Cuestiones actuales: La*



*concepción virginal de Jesús*, in *Ephemerides Mariologicae*, 21 (1971) 63-100.<sup>1</sup> Thereupon I shall try to offer a constructive statement of the Lutheran position.

### I. *Liturgical and Symbolical Books*

The consistent affirmation of the virginal conception and birth of our Lord in the Lutheran church-bodies of America is illustrated in recent liturgical documents.

The *Worship Supplement* authorized by the Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches<sup>2</sup> (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1969) contains three eucharistic rites for experimental use side by side with the rite prescribed in *The Lutheran Liturgy* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, [1948]), as well as other orders of service, and 93 additional hymns.

"Eucharist I" reproduces in the creed the text of The International Consultation on Liturgical Texts: "By the power of the Holy Spirit [Jesus Christ] was born of the Virgin Mary" (p. 24). The second eucharistic prayer of this rite refers to Christ's "whole work of redemption," beginning with "his conception and birth" (p. 46). The third eucharistic prayer of this rite reproduces the prayer of thanksgiving ascribed to St. Hippolytus in the *Apostolic Tradition*, including the passage: "Whom you did send from heaven into the womb of

<sup>1</sup> Such as Alonso's discussions of the views of Rudolf Bultmann (pp. 67-71), Ethelbert Stauffer (pp. 71-74), Willi Marxsen (pp. 74-75), Walter Delius (pp. 83-84), Hans von Campenhausen (pp. 86-88), Günther Bornkamm (pp. 95-99), Heikki Räisänen (pp. 99-100), Wolfhart Pannenberg (pp. 104-107), Paul Althaus, Jr. (note 67, pp. 105-106), and the earlier work of Regin Preter (pp. 107-109). Not all Lutherans would acknowledge all of these authors as authentic spokesmen for the Lutheran Church.

<sup>2</sup> The Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, composed predominantly of persons of Slovak background, has since the publication of the *Worship Supplement* become a nongeographical "district" of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

the Virgin and who, having been conceived within her, became flesh, and was manifested as your Son, being born of the Holy Spirit and a virgin" (*ibid.*). The other eucharistic rites are designed for small congregations of worshipers and for ferial use. Accordingly they lack the creed and the brief eucharistic prayers do not refer to the conception of our Lord.

At Sunday Matins the *Te Deum laudamus* retains the conventional phrasing: "When you took upon you to deliver man, you did humble yourself to be born of a virgin" (p. 72). In the choir offices and certain other services the so-called Apostles' Creed contains the article: "Who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary" (p. 80).

In the hymn section the first hymn is a 19th/20th century composite translation of *Veni, Redemptor gentium*. It includes these passages: "Virgin's Son, here make thy home!/ Marvel now, O heaven and earth,/ That the Lord chose such a birth," and "Wondrous birth! O wondrous Child/ Of the Virgin undefiled!" (No. 701). *Conditor alme siderum* is given in the John Mason Neale version. Stanza 3 refers to "the spotless Victim all divine/ Proceeding from a virgin shrine" (No. 703). The medieval hymn "Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ" is given in a contemporary English translation. It hails Christ as "from virgin born" and depicts the Mother of God: "The virgin mother lulls to sleep/ Him who rules the cosmic deep" (No. 708). The doxology of John Ellerton's translation of a cento from *A solis ortus cardine* by Coelius Sedulius, "From East to West, from Shore to Shore," includes the line: "All praise to the, O Virgin-born" (No. 709). The doxology of "Angels We Have Heard on High" similarly includes the line: "Glory, Virgin-born, to thee" (No. 711). F. Samuel Janzow's contemporary carol "From Shepherding of Stars that Gaze" declares in stanza 3: "This night your King brings from afar/ The Virgin's lullaby" (No. 713). Stanza 2 of a new version of *Resonet in laudibus* has this line: "A chosen virgin gave



him birth" (No. 718). No. 719 is William Chatterton Dix' carol "What Child Is This?"; staza 3 states: "The Virgin sings her lullaby." No. 720 is Henry Lettermann's contemporary "Who Are These That Earnest Knock"; the first stanza describes "Joseph and the Virgin mild/ Seeking shelter for the Child." No. 721 is "Corde natus ex parentis"; stanza 2 exults: "O that birth forever blessed,/ When the Virgin, full of grace,/ By the Holy Ghost conceiving,/ Bore the Savior of our race." Elizabeth von Meseritz Cruciger's hymn "Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn" (in Arthur T. Russell's translation) calls Christ "the Virgin-born" (No. 722). A metrical dialog version of the *Te Deum laudamus* addresses our Lord: "To save us, wretched and forlorn,/ Wast made our brother, Virgin-born" (No. 745).

In the modern hymn, "This Night Did God Become a Child," by Raymond Schulze (born 1932), published in 1968 in the holiday annual *Christmas* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968) and republished as No. 19 in *Contemporary Worship 1: Hymns* (same publisher, 1969) for the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, stanza 3 reads: "His wealth and power next to none,/ Earth's Creator, Mary's Son,/ Comes to deal with lowly folk,/ Baby's arms to lift our yoke./ Sing we alleluia!"

In the Inter-Lutheran Rite for the Celebration of the Holy Communion (set forth for trial use by all the major Lutheran synods in *Contemporary Worship 2: Services—The Holy Communion* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970]), the creed again appears in the form agreed upon by The International Consultation on Liturgical Texts, including the clause: "By the power of the Holy Spirit [Jesus Christ] was born of the Virgin Mary" (p. 7). The eucharistic canon repeats this phraseology, although without explicitly introducing the title "Virgin": "And, when the time had come, you sent your Son, born of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit" (p. 15).

The *Book of Concord*—to which Lutheran clergymen are

committed at the time of their ordination—repeatedly affirms the fact of the virgin conception and birth of our Lord,<sup>3</sup> but only once does it come even close to using it as a premise from which to draw a theological conclusion. The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration (1577), 8, 24, states: "By reason of this hypostatic union and communion of natures, Mary, the most praiseworthy virgin, did not give birth to a plain human being, but to such a kind of human being who is truly the Son of God the most high, as the angel attests. Her Son demonstrated his divine majesty even in the womb, in that he was born from a virgin with her virgin condition undamaged (*unvorletzt ihrer Jungfrauschaft; inviolata ipsius virginitate*). On that account she [is] truly the Mother of God and yet stayed a virgin." The virginal conception and birth of our Lord thus attest and demonstrate the hypostatic union of His God-head and His manhood that results from the Incarnation.<sup>4</sup>

The *Large Catechism* (Creed, 31) links the virginal conception and birth of Christ with His sinlessness, but without affirming a causal relationship between them. It describes the word "Lord" in the statement "I believe in Jesus Christ, [God's] only Son, our Lord," as the sum of the second or Christologi-

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the passages discussed in the following paragraphs, see "Apostles' Creed; "Nicene" Creed; Augsburg Confession [2, 1:] 3, 1; Smalcald Articles, Part One, 4; and Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, 7, 100 Latin. Augsburg Confession 2, 1, bracketed in this list, reads: "Docent quod post lapsum Adae omnes homines secundum naturam propagati nascuntur cum peccato." This may by implication intend to except our Lord from the taint of native sinfulness; so, for example, Leif Grane, *Die Confessio Augustana: Einführung in die Hauptgedanken der lutherischen Reformation*, translated from the Danish original (1959) by Eberhard Harbsmeier (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), p. 24. The Latin of Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, 7, 100 refers to the widespread belief that our Lord was born "de sanctissima virgine Maria" without violation of her physiological virginity; the German original omits the quoted words.

<sup>4</sup> The German original of the corresponding passage in the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, 8, 12, does not describe St. Mary as "virgin," although the Latin translation does.



cal section of the creed. It makes it almost a synonym of "liberator" or "savior," that is, the one "who has brought us from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to justice and preserves us in" this status. The individual clauses of the section, says the Large Catechism, "do nothing else than clarify and express this liberation, how and through what it took place, that is, what it cost him and what he expended and wagered on it, to win us for himself and bring us under his lordship, namely, that he became a human being, that he was conceived and born out of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin without any sin, so that he might become the Lord over sins, and in addition suffered, died, and was buried, that he might satisfy for me and pay the debts that I had incurred, not with silver or gold, but with his own precious blood. And all this to this one purpose that he might become my Lord. Because he neither did nor needed to do any of that for his own sake. Thereafter that he rose again, swallowed up death and devoured it, and finally went to heaven and took over the rulership at the Father's right hand, so that the devil and all power must be subject to him and lie at his feet, until at the last day he finally divides and separates us from the evil world, devil, death, sin, and so on." The *Small Catechism* (Creed, 4) says it more briefly: "I believe that Jesus Christ, veritable God, sired by the Father in eternity, and also a veritable human being, born from the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being, bought me, won me, and [liberated me] from all sins, from death, and from the devil's power, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death, that I might be his own and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal justice, innocence, and bliss, just as he rose from the dead, lives, and rules for ever."

## II. *Older Theologians*

Lutheran theology in the subsequent era of classic orthodoxy

(1580-1713) spent little time on the reasons why Our Lord was virginally conceived and born. At most the virgin conception was seen as an appropriate evidence of the Godhead of our Lord. On occasion the virgin conception was linked with the sinlessness (*anamartêsia*) of our Lord, but an analysis of the argument indicates that His sinlessness was regarded as the result of the sanctifying and cleansing operation of the *Holy Spirit* in connection with Christ's conception rather than as the result of our Lord's conception by a *virgin*.<sup>5</sup>

John-Andrew Quenstedt (1617-1682) described the purpose (*finis*) of Christ's conception as our salvation (Mat. 1:21) and the hallowing of our impure conception (Heb. 2:17-18). But while he regards Christ's "pure and holy" conception as hallowing and cleansing our "impure, sinful, and damnable" conception, he saw this as implemented through holy baptism. "Even though we are 'conceived unclean out of unclean seed' (Job 14:4: ['Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one']), 'flesh out of flesh' (Jn. 3:6), 'corrupted from the womb' (Ps. 58:3 ['The wicked go astray from the womb']) and thus 'children of anger' (Eph. 2:3), as Bernard complains in *Meditationes devotissimae*, chapter 2, neverthe-

<sup>5</sup> A case in point is Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), *De duabus naturis in Christo* (1578), chapter 3 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Haeredes Tobiae Maevii et Elerdi Schumacheri, 1653), p. 13, col. 2: "Mariae Gabriel dicit, Spiritus sanctus superveniet in te, & virtus altissimi obumbrabit tibi: ut sanctum sit, quod ex te nascetur: Spiritus sancti igitur operatione effectum est, ut Maria virgo sine virili semine conciperet, & gravida redderetur. Et illam massam, quam de Mariae carne & sanguine in illa conceptione, Filius Dei assumpsit, Spiritus sanctus ita sanctificavit, & mundavit ab omni labe peccati, ut sanctum sit, quod nascitur ex Maria, Luc. 1." (See the English translation by Jacob A. O. Preus, *The Two Natures in Christ* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971], p. 57). Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3d edition, translated by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (1899) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 301, cites this passage; significantly, it is the only one in Schmid's compendium in which the reason for the virgin conception is suggested even tangentially.



less after being born we are reborn through baptism and established as children of God (Eph. 5:27)."<sup>6</sup>

John William Baier (1647-1695) in his *Compendium theologiae positivae* (1686) could see the Blessed Virgin's conception of our Lord as the certain reason why some human (although obviously not moral) weaknesses entered His humanity.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Theologia didactico-polemica*, pars III, caput III, membrum iii, thesis xvii (Wittenberg: Johannes Ludolphus Quenstedt et Elerdi Schumacheri Haeredes, 1685), 3, 343. Following John-Conrad Dannhauer (1603-1666) of Strasbourg, Quenstedt also saw Christ's conception as hallowing and saving fetuses that die in the womb or in the process of birth (*ibid.*)

<sup>7</sup> "Qua ratione certum est, nonnullas infirmitates concurrere, quae poterant locum non habere, ut tamen filius Dei verus homo fieret" (pars III, caput II, sectio II, §3b, ed. Carolus Ferdinandus Guilielmus Walther, expanded edition [St. Louis: Officina Synodi Missouriensis Lutheranae, 1879], 3, 84). Baier defined the matter of Christ's human nature as "the bloody lump (*massa*) of the virgin Mary out of which Christ's human nature was made or produced. The impregnation of Mary itself and the production of Christ's human nature accomplished thereby can be described as a supernatural action, in which the Holy Spirit sanctified the bloody lump of the blessed virgin Mary and disposed and elevated that which had been set aside as the customary place of generation so that a complete human foetus might be made from it" (*Ibid.*, caput I, sectio I, §§7-8, ed. Walther, 3, 28). Christian Löber (1683-1747), *Die Lehre der Wahrheit zur Gottseligkeit, das ist, Theologia positiva deutsch* [1711], played an important role in the 19th century Lutheran confessional revival among the German Lutheran immigrants to the United States when it was reprinted under the title *Evangelisch-Lutherische Dogmatik* (St. Louis: Verlag von Fr. Dette, 1872). It follows a similar line: "The Holy Spirit hallowed and purified the matter in the body and from the body of the virgin Mary out of which the body of Christ was formed in such a way that he was born totally free of original sinfulness, just as he never committed any actual sin" (p. 502). Augustus Lawrence Graebner (1849-1904), *Doctrinal Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1910) continued the tradition of classic Lutheran orthodoxy in the United States in declaring that "the conception of Christ by the Holy Ghost in the Virgin Mary, whereby the Son of God assumed a human nature, was the beginning of his humiliation, not inasmuch as it was the assumption of a human nature by the Son of God, but in so far as the manner in which the incarnation took place was by conception in the womb of a sinful woman, from whom the Son of God took his human nature, but without a stain

Classic Lutheran orthodoxy proved the participation of all three hypostases of the Holy Trinity in the origination of Christ's human nature. In the case of the Father it did so from Gal. 4, 4 and Rom. 8, 3. In the case of the Son it identified the *virtus altissimi* which overshadowed Mary (Lk. 1, 35) as the second hypostasis of the Holy Trinity. In the case of the Holy Spirit it pointed to the coming of the Holy Spirit upon her. It regarded the proximate reason why the son of Mary is the Son of God as being not His unique conception by the Holy Spirit but the incarnation of the Word of God.<sup>8</sup> It was sufficiently interested in some of the questions with which the fathers had involved themselves to take them up anew. One

of sin, that he might atone for, and cover, our innate sinfulness" (p. 115). So did Franz August Otto Pieper (1852-1831), *Christliche Dogmatik*, 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), when he specified: "The cause of [Christ's] sinlessness is not the preservation of a 'holy lump' (*massa sancta*) in Israel [as the Scholastics and others supposed], or an evolution from the unholy to the holy, as if by way of natural or spiritual striving a sinless individual had gradually developed out of sinful forebears, or the immaculate conception of Mary...but the fact that Mary became the mother of Christ according to his human nature *ek pneumatos hagiou*, Luke 1, 35: 'The Holy Ghost will come upon you; therefore the holy thing that will be born will be called the Son of God'" (p. 78). It may also be noted that Pieper (loc. cit., pp. 365-366) offers no reason for accepting Christ's virginal conception other than the assertion of the Sacred Scriptures.

<sup>8</sup> So, for instance, David Hollazius (1648-1713), *Examen theologicum acroamaticum* (1710), pars III, theologica sectio I, caput iii, quaestio 14, 4th edition by Johannes Henricus Hollazius (Stockholm: Johannes Heinrichus Russwormius, 1725), 2, 84-85. In identifying the *virtus altissimi* as the second hypostasis of Holy Trinity, the theologians of classic Lutheran orthodoxy like Chemnitz, John Gerhard (1582-1637), Just Feuerborn (1587-1656), John-George Dorsche (1597-1659), and Quenstedt, were standing in a tradition that went back via Theophylact of Ohrid and St. John of Damascus to the Venerable Bede, Tyrannius Rufinus, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Athanasius (Quenstedt, *op. cit.*, thesis xii, 3, 339).

For an extensive development of this theme, with citations of the patristic opinions, see John Gerhard, *Loci theologici* (1625), locus quartus, caput VII, paragraphs 102-103, 105, ed. Eduardus Preuss, 1 (Berlin: Gustavus Schlawitz, 1863), 491-494. Contemporary exegetes commonly regard the *dynamis hypsistou* as the Holy Spirit.



such issue was if the Holy Spirit had formed all the members of Christ's body in a single instant or had done so successively. Another question was if the Incarnation had taken place when St. Gabriel pronounced the word *kecharitomenê* or when he had spoken the word *concupies* or after the Mother of God had said *Ecce ancilla Domini* and *fiat mihi sicut dixisti*.<sup>9</sup>

### III. *Modern Authors*

Contemporary Lutheran systematicians and exegetes exhibit a fairly wide spectrum of opinion.

Gustav Emanuel Hildebrand Aulen (born 1879), long the Lutheran bishop of Lund, Sweden, devotes very little attention to the virgin conception of Christ in his dogmatics, *Den allmänneliga kristna tron* (1923), extensively rewritten in the fifth edition (1856), from which the second English edition was translated by Eric H. Wahlstrom as *The Faith of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1960). The section on "The Incarnation" is a part of chapter 3, "The Victorious Act of Reconciliation." The section ends with a "note on the boundary line of faith." "Since faith meets Christ as the incarnation of divine love, it comprehends the mystery of his person in the eternal and divine will and in nothing else." It perceives "that both his work and the mystery of his person rest on the nature of God himself, or, in other words, on the incarnation. 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father' (Jn 1:14). 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Col. 2:9). The church expressed the truth and the mystery of this incarnation in the words of the Nicene Creed: 'Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnated by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.' The Church, therefore, traces the mystery of his

<sup>9</sup> See Gerhard, loc. cit., paragraphs 113-114, ed. Preuss, pp. 497-498.

person to his divine origin, to his being 'in the bosom of the Father' (Jn. 1:18). In this sense the words of [Archbishop] Nathan Söderblom are true: 'The miracle of his being was already present in the bosom of Mary.' This is also the religious import of the statement that Jesus became man without a human father, which we find in the gospel narratives, especially in Matthew." But this idea is "impotent" as "*a rational explanation of the mystery of the person of Christ*" (p. 195). Likewise as "an explanation of [Christ's] 'sinlessness,' or at least of his 'freedom from original sin,'" the birth of Christ "explains nothing." Christian faith talks about "the unity of substance" of the Son and the Father. But this "does not consist in some special physiological nature, which would jeopardize Christ's true humanity"; it consists in this "that we possess 'the heart and will of the Father in Christ.'" Christian faith must reject all rationalistic explanations; theology's function is "not to explain the possibility of the person and the work of Christ. In the presence of the unfathomable love of God, which is and remains the one great miracle, all attempts toward a rational explanation remain useless" (p. 196).<sup>10</sup>

Werner Elert (1885-1954) was an influential conservative German Lutheran dogmatician of this century. In *Der christliche Glaube: Grundlinien der lutherischen Dogmatik*, 3d edition (Hamburg: Furche-Verlag, 1956), pp. 309-311, he discusses the significance of the virgin conception of our Lord for theology. He asserts the inadmissibility of arguments against the miracle on the grounds of its impossibility or of its viola-

<sup>10</sup> Another Swedish theologian, Provost Gustav Adolf Danell (born 1908), has written an article in *Studia Theologica*, 4 (1950), 94-101, *Did St. Paul Know the Tradition About the Virgin Birth?* in which he has argued on the basis of Romans 1:3-4 that St. Paul quite possibly knew Luke 1, 35. "If the compressed and difficult words Romans 1, 3f. contain an allusion to the tradition of the Virgin Birth related in Luke 1, 26-38, then this would imply that the supernatural birth is there put in the closest relation to the resurrection, which then would be the confirmation not only of a 'spiritual' divinity of Jesus but of his supernatural origin" (pp. 100-101).



tion of the laws of nature. By the same token he rejects the argument in favor of the miracle on the grounds of the divine omnipotence: "In the name of God's almighty power one could say just as well that the virgin birth was not necessary. The gospel does not tell us what God can do, but what he did, what he does, and what he will do. Accordingly, theology must restrict itself to this. It speaks about God, of course, but only about the God who was in Christ. Vice versa, theology talks only about Christ, because God was in him. For that reason it cannot talk about his origin in any other way. That happens when it affirms the thesis that the Word of God became flesh, that, to talk like St. John of Damascus, the Word of God was the person-creating factor (*das Personbildende*) in Christ. This teaching [that is, the incarnation] is inevitably necessary in Christology, because with it our acceptance of the claim that Christ made for himself stands or falls. On the other hand, he himself never claimed to have been born of a virgin. That does not of course contradict the fact. He did not deny it or say anything that would have contradicted it. But since he did not explicitly make this claim, the question must be put in this form: Is there a recognizable connection between the teaching of the virgin birth and the teaching that the Word of God became flesh? [p. 309] If this question cannot be affirmatively answered, the teaching of the virgin birth continues to be there in the gospels. But theology could then regard the latter teaching only as irrelevant (*'dahingestellt'*)."

Elert holds that the connection between these two doctrines is not adequately established by making the virgin birth the actual basis (*Realgrund*) of our Lord's sinlessness, although this view goes back to the fathers of the church. The New Testament witness provides no basis for this construct. We must look for the connection between the Godhead of Christ and the virgin birth elsewhere. The creedal clause "born of the Virgin" is only a conclusion, even though a necessary one, from the witness of the evangelists. "The witness in question

has as its content not the birth, but the conception. It leads to the very final limit of the time-frame and of the humanity (*Menschseins*) of Christ's person in precisely the same way as the teachings of the preexistence and the incarnation of the Word of God do. The parallel goes even farther. The witness of Luke (1:35) implies that the child that is about to be conceived is to be called the Son of God because of (*dio*) his conception by the power of the Spirit. This cannot mean that God himself took the place of the child's physical father. That would imply a myth of conjugal relationship from which the faith in God that the gospel commands would have to shrink in repugnance. In the context, the meaning of the sentence can be discovered only from its opposite. The virgin 'has no husband' (*andra ou ginôskô*) (v. 34). The human prerequisite for the generation of a child is thus missing. Even if Mary wished it, her desire would on this account have remained unfulfilled. But what the virgin does *not* will, because she cannot will it, is precisely what God wills. The conception of Christ is thus on a par with the birth of the 'children of God,' which takes place 'not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a human being, but of God' (Jn 1:13). One can follow the most ancient witnesses to this text—Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian—and read the singular for the plural noun and verbs. In that case the statement would refer directly to Christ. But even if one does not do so, the statement stands in very close proximity within the prologue to John's gospel to that other statement that the Word became flesh (vv. 13 and 14). As little as 'being born again from above' (Jn. 3:3) reflects the will of the flesh, so little does Christ's conception reflect it. Both events take place contrary to the will of human beings. When the woman who is about to conceive sees what is happening to her as an act of grace (*Begnadigung*) (Lk. 1:48ff.), she is simply saying the same thing in different words.

"If, as said, theology can only talk about the origin of the human being Jesus because 'God was in Christ,' then the two



statements, that the Word of God became flesh and that he was conceived in the flesh without the will of a human being [p. 310], converge on a single point from two different directions. It was not the will of a human being nor the ability of the flesh that made it possible for the human being Jesus Christ to make the claim that he was the Son of God. This claim is the negative side of the affirmation that the teaching of the virgin birth expresses. It was the Word of God himself that made this claim possible. That is the concomitant positive side of the affirmation. As the Synoptists touch John here, so Paul likewise coincides with them. 'What the law could not do'—the passage could also read, what was impossible for human beings—'God has done and sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh' (Rom. 8:3). He did this, in having him 'born of a woman' (Gal. 4, 4). Even though the apostle is not speaking directly about the virgin birth, one can still ask why Paul talks only about a woman and not about human parents. The witness of the evangelists provides the answer" (p. 311).

Another conservative German Lutheran theologian was the late University of Münster theologian, Ernest Kinder (1910-1970). In his 13,000-word article, "Christology," in Julius Bodensieck, editor, *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), he speaks of the virgin conception of Christ (1, 477-478) under the sub-head "The Incarnation." He observes that the fact of the "incomprehensible coming of the eternal Son-*Logos* from the Father into the creature world and into the human race is absolutely fundamental for his existence and all his activity." With our human limitations we are unable to describe this coming itself; we can only confess the point from which it begins and the goal that it finally attains. "The [creed] does this very thing in the twin statements 'conceived by the Holy Ghost' and 'born of the virgin Mary.' The two statements belong together and constitute different phases of the incarnation event. The first statement takes note of the transcendent factor, 'from be-

yond the border,' the ultimate source of the event; the second speaks of the event as it took place in our world, 'as he who was coming arrived.' The former is the primary thing, because the birth (p. 477) of the Man Jesus in time—or his conception in the womb—does not mark the beginning of his existence as such. Rather we are confronted here by something new: a direct creative—one could say: vertical—act of God (antecedent to the conception and birth and bringing it about) by which he personally emerged from himself. 'Conceived by the Holy Ghost' furthermore means that the incarnation is motivated by love, which constitutes the very essence of God's being and which moved him to offer himself for our salvation. This truth makes also the second term meaningful. 'Born of the Virgin Mary' means that God's emergence from the transcendental world has its counterpart in the actual coming to us in this world, that because 'God sent forth his Son' a true man was 'born of a woman' (Gal. 4:4). The term 'born of the virgin Mary' is here however not to be understood and exploited in isolation, but must always be taken as the earthly correlative of its transcendental counterpart 'conceived by the Holy Ghost.' In this particular aspect the term is directed against docetism. . . . Theologically it is of importance that the birth of Jesus (or his conception) be clearly confessed as the historical biographical point where the eternal Son-*Logos*-God did enter into union with man and that this event did not take place at some later stage of his life." This "transcendent act determines his human existence from its very incipience." Whatever this human being is as a true and genuine human being "is due solely to the fact that he is the Son of God, in accordance with God's saving will."

The virgin birth does not suggest anything like a "theogamy." Christ's birth itself points backward and beyond time to the preexistent Son of God. We dare not "fabricate alleged theological necessities" purporting to show that the eternal Son of God could have become a human being only in this way



and in no other. Theological considerations do not in any way motivate the confession of the virgin birth. The confession of the virgin birth does not try to "explain" anything. The "great and mighty wonder" in which the Son of God became a human being defies any attempt at explanation, particularly by means of another, lesser miracle, that is, the virgin conception and birth. It is also "an error to adduce the virgin birth as proof for the sinlessness of Jesus, quite apart from the fact that it is an error" to assume that the process of procreation *causes* the transmission of sin. The confession of the virgin conception and birth merely "states the historic fact that the great miracle by which the Son of God became" a human being took place through "the lesser miracle of the virgin birth." The virgin birth is a kind of object lesson "by which God indicates that this Man, 'the second Adam,' came into being without benefit of any 'secondary causes,' in other words, here is a new beginning created by a direct act 'from above,' a 'vertical' act quite contrary to usual horizontal procedures. This does not preclude that humanity was also a participant when the 'Second Adam' came into being, but only in a passive way, letting itself be assumed and permeated (Lk. 1:38: ['Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word']). But we can merely hint at this mystery; its very nature forbids us to venture any further" (p. 478).

Regin Prenter (born 1907) of Aarhus is one of Scandinavia's ablest Lutheran theologians.<sup>11</sup> In 1964 he wrote a manual of doctrine for laymen *Kirkens tro: En kristenlaere for laegfolk*. This has been translated into English by Theodor I. Jensen as *The Church's Faith: A Primer of Christian Beliefs* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968). Under "Salvation Events" he discusses "the virgin birth in connection with the conception by the Holy Ghost." He notes that it is mentioned only twice

<sup>11</sup> See also Alonso's discussion of Prenter's earlier work (*art. cit.*, pp. 107-109).

in the New Testament. "Therefore it cannot be maintained that the virgin birth is prominently attested in the New Testament as compared, for example, with the resurrection." Nor does the New Testament ever mention "the virgin birth as an essential part of the message of salvation." Faith in the virgin birth is not based on eye-witnesses. "These facts must not be overlooked when discussing the extent to which the idea of the virgin birth necessarily belongs to the Christian faith." But on the other hand, two of the four Gospels "do mention the virgin birth and not just in passing either, but in some detail." These stories are "in the form of legends (that is, they deal with miraculous events unattested by witnesses to whom one might appeal), but they are clearly regarded by the authors as dealing with something real and true." Even Luke, "who took pains to relate only what he considered true and well-attested," records the annunciation and the virgin birth in great detail (p. 79). The Old Testament prototype passage, Is. 7:14, according to the original Hebrew text "admittedly does not speak of a virgin but of a 'young woman,' quite possibly a young married woman." Neither Mark nor John nor Paul mention the virgin birth, but "it cannot be denied that two of the four evangelists were of the opinion that the narrative concerning it belonged to the gospel. Likewise, the earliest church in both the East and the West incorporated the virgin birth into its baptismal creeds.

Matthew and Luke "incorporated the narratives of the virgin birth into their gospels" and the ancient church included the virgin birth in its creed "because they wanted to confess clearly that Jesus of Nazareth was really God's only begotten Son who became man, and that [although he was as one of us] he was not one among the many condemned descendents of Adam." Jn. 1:14, Phil. 2:6-7, Rom. 8:3 provide "the real meaning of the phrase, 'conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.' Its meaning is not that it explains the miracle of Jesus' coming into being (p. 80). The intention of the



legendary form of the accounts of the annunciation is none other than to point out that what we have here is a divine mystery, a unique miracle, that 'the word became flesh,' but that we have no exact report from Nazareth about how it all really happened. The birth of Jesus is a miracle because, though born like every other human being, he is not a lost son of Adam like all the rest of us who are born of women, but on the contrary, the second Adam, the head of a new sinless generation (Rom. 5:18-19; I Cor. 15:45-47). *This* is the point of the words, 'conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.' This is why these words, despite the problems they present, must remain in the creed, just as the story of the annunciation cannot be stricken from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

"The miracle of the birth of Jesus cannot be deleted from the Gospel. Whoever does not believe in Jesus Christ as true God and true man must naturally reject the stories of the virgin birth as pious myths. Furthermore, if he who does believe in Jesus Christ as true God and true man is also inclined to regard the New Testament accounts of the virgin birth as pious myths because of their scanty documentation and their legendary form, he must at least ask himself whether he is not thereby in danger of rejecting the birth of Jesus as a divine miracle. It is indeed possible to reject the virgin birth as an historical event without thereby denying that the birth of Jesus was a divine miracle—we must candidly make this concession to modern people who want to believe in Jesus Christ but find it difficult to accept the reality of the virgin birth. But it is not necessary to reject the tradition of the virgin birth because, though no miracle can ever be proved, no miracle can, strictly speaking, be disproved either. According to Luke's account, the angel Gabriel said, 'With God nothing will be impossible' (1:37)" (p. 81).

In the somewhat ambiguous situation of French Lutheranism, it may be precarious to cite Oscar Cullmann (born 1902)

as a witness for European Lutheranism. But he himself has claimed to be a Lutheran. In *The Christology of the New Testament*, revised (1957) edition translated by Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, [1963], Cullmann refers in passing on p. 295 to the differences between the infancy narratives of the first and third gospels and the later apocryphal gospels, a theme on which he expands in his chapter "Infancy Gospels" in Wilhelm Schneemelcher's third edition of Edgar Hennecke, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, published in English as *New Testament Apocrypha*, translated and edited by R. McL. Wilson, 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 363-369. In the cited chapter Cullmann points out that "even the canonical birth stories betray legendary motives which have parallels in extra-biblical literature, especially in India, Egypt, and Persia." The narrative interest of the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke is subordinate to the "theological interest which was the chief impulse to their formation." The two different and independent forms of the nativity story in the first and third gospels are "told in terms of a theological proposition in primitive belief, namely that God revealed himself in Christ so directly that unity of will and being must be assumed." These two gospels "attempt to explain the nature of this unity by means of conception by the Holy Spirit and the virgin birth, and are therefore obliged to view Joseph's paternity as adoptive" (p. 364). This leads to a certain tension with the concern "to emphasize the christological affinity of Jesus with the Old Testament." The result is the two different genealogies. In the apocryphal infancy narratives, the theological interest steps behind the narrative interest and characters in the tradition that were originally important because of their relation to Christ "become the vehicles of legendary motifs. This is especially the case with Mary and Joseph" (p. 366). The apocryphal accounts provide details about Mary's parents, tell the



story of her own miraculous birth, and affirm her perpetual virginity.

In his *Christology of the New Testament* Cullmann sees Matthew and Luke trying "by means of the infancy narratives to *explain* Jesus' sonship and to lift the veil from the question 'how' the Father begets the Son." The traditions that they use "utilized familiar oriental and Hellenistic themes." But they exhibit a "theological concern to report only so much as seems necessary to demonstrate the unique conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit." Reporting the "how" of the divine sonship of Jesus in terms of the virgin birth creates the problem "of harmonizing this idea with the church's pre-Pauline confession of the Davidic sonship 'according to the flesh' (Rom. 1:3f.)," which had operated with a "carnal" Davidic sonship and a "'spiritual' divine sonship 'in power' on the basis of the resurrection." The first and third Gospels tried to solve this problem "by interpreting the human descent from David to mean Jesus' *adoption* into Joseph's Davidic family," with Luke using the formula *hōs enomizeto* in 3:23, and Matthew closing his genealogy by calling "Joseph the husband of *Mary, of whom* Jesus was born (1:16)."

Cullmann sees the history of the textual transmission of the gospels as indicating that this solution "does not seem to have proved satisfactory" (p. 295). Accordingly, the attempt was made to show that Mary also came from the Davidic line by substituting *autous* or *amphoterous* for *auton* in Lk. 2, 4. Cullmann observes that "born of a woman" in Gal. 4:4 could be said of everybody and that the singular in John 1:13, even if original, merely asserts that "*our* sonship is grounded in the sonship of *the* Son and becomes a reality through faith in him." (Cullmann in an excursus that follows asserts that he is not ready to reject the singular as decidedly as Rudolph Bultmann does.) Cullmann concludes: "In explaining Jesus' divine sonship by asserting his virgin birth, Matthew and Luke separate themselves not only from all other New Testament writings,

but also from Mark, for whom faith in Jesus the Son of God is basically far more central, but who consciously respects the mystery with which Jesus himself surrounded this title" (p. 297).

Krister Stendahl (born 1921), dean of the Harvard University Divinity School and an internationally recognized New Testament scholar, is also a priest of the Church of Sweden, who has at least twice been under active consideration for elevation to the episcopate; in the United States he is a member of the ministerium of the Lutheran Church in America. His seminal essay, *Quis et unde? An Analysis of Matthew 1-2*, came out in the collection to tributes published in honor of the 60th birthday of Joachim Jeremias, *Judentum—Urchristentum—Kirche: Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias*, edited by Walther Eltester (Berlin: Verlag Alfred Töpelmann, 1960). Stendahl operates with the hypothesis that the first two chapters of the first Gospel are an effort to "substantiate and defend the divine Names (ch. 1) and the Locale (ch. 2) of the messianic event." On the basis of Matthew 3:1, he holds that the evangelist did not regard these chapters as "an account of events" (p. 104). The account of the events begins with the Markan material in chapter 3. "That account is prefaced by an apologetic and scriptural answer to the questions *Quis et Unde?* Strictly speaking, there is nothing which could be called the Matthean 'Birth Narrative' or 'Vorgeschichte,' if we were to remain faithful to the Matthean intention in our interpretation of the First Gospel" (p. 105). Previously Stendahl had said: "It is obvious that the supernatural birth of Jesus was known to Matthew, and the tradition was apparently known well enough to have given rise to slanderous remarks. But it is equally clear that Matthew is not announcing the birth story. Furthermore, in Matthew the virgin birth story is theologically mute; no christological argument or insight is deduced from this great divine intervention. There is little reason to read the Immanuel prophecy in the direction of 'incarnation.' The



context suggests rather a Jewish, messianic understanding. In Jesus' messianic deed God visits his people and sets them free from the hardships which their sins have justly caused. One could even raise the question whether Matthew has thought of this intervention of God through the Spirit as an absolutely 'unique' event. Does he not rather see it as a glorious heightening of the divine interventions of old, by which God proved faithful to his covenant with Abraham and his promises to David? This last event makes it all fall into the prophetic pattern of messianic fulfillment: Born through divine intervention, recognized by Joseph, and thereby the Son of David, he is given the name Jesus, i.e., he comes with the bliss of the age to come: Immanuel" (pp. 103-104).

The Eisenach rector Walter Grundmann (born 1906) has provided the commentaries on both St. Matthew and St. Luke in the second edition of the *Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament* under the general editorial direction of Erich Fascher (*Das Evangelium nach Lukas* [Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1961?]; *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* [Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968]).

In his commentary on Matthew, Grundmann concurs in Stendahl's view that the first two chapters answer the double question who Jesus of Nazareth is and from where he comes. He is the Spirit-sired messianic son of Abraham and David; He comes from Bethlehem in fulfillment of prophecy and God leads Him out of Bethlehem to Nazareth. The genealogy of Jesus in chapter 1 tends toward the biological paternity of Joseph, and its original form goes back to a time that does not yet know about the virgin birth. Matthew can combine his genealogy with the virgin birth account because Jewish thought regarded paternity as less a biological than a juridical matter. The purpose of the account is apologetic; it is to meet and to silence the doubts of those who tended to deny the virgin birth (pp. 59-71).

Grundmann's prefatory note to the Lukan infancy narrative

stresses the parallels between John the Baptist and our Lord. The story cycle consists of materials of varying age and differing provenience. In using it, the evangelist is addressing himself to the conflict between the communities that looked back to the Baptist and those that looked back to Jesus as their original. The evangelist's purpose is to stress that there was no rivalry between John and Jesus; God raised both of them up and gave to each his place. They cannot be separated from or placed in opposition to one another (p. 46).

In his commentary proper Grundmann considers the possibility that the annunciation account may be a reworking of an account of an annunciation of John's birth to his mother Elizabeth. Even assuming that the episode was originally an annunciation to Mary, Grundmann sees as unanswered the question if the virgin birth promise of 1:34-37 was part of the original story or if it was introduced by Luke or someone else. It is, however, part of the text of the gospel as it was handed down (pp. 53-59).

In his excursus on the virgin birth Grundmann states that, apart from the first and third gospels, the entire New Testament tradition knows nothing of the virgin birth; it has "in part traditions that contradict it" (p. 59); he cites Mk. 3:20-21; 6:1-6a; Jn. 1:45; 6:42; 7:41-42 Gal. 4:4; and even Lk. 2: 5 (in some ancient readings), 43, and 48. He sees the idea of the virgin birth as originating in Hellenistic Jewish-Christian circles. "In Luke the [divine] sonship of Jesus is not based on the virgin birth, but on the word and Spirit of God, and the virgin birth is added as an illustrative and indicative (*veranschaulichend-andeutende*) conception. But its adoption makes it clear that primitive Christianity knew that in the Jesus in whom it believed not only the promises of the [Jewish] scriptures but also the myths of the Gentiles found fulfillment" (p. 61).

A North American Lutheran exegete who has written briefly on our subject is John Henry Paul Reumann (born 1927), an



exceedingly capable younger professor of the New Testament at the Philadelphia seminary of the Lutheran Church in America. In his book *Jesus in the Church's Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), Reumann repudiates "the possibility of recovering [Christ's] 'messianic consciousness or even his particular 'self-consciousness' [from the gospels], but we can hope to see something of his understanding of life—how he looked on existence under God and life in a time when God's reign was drawing near." He denies "the possibility . . . of tracing the development of Jesus' views and then of psychologizing this development. For the material about Jesus contained in the gospels, the resurrection light shines through in case after case. . . . The Christology involved is the early church's confession, not memoirs from a disciple's hand apart from Easter, let alone 'the diary of Jesus' innermost thoughts' during his lifetime" (p. 138). He regards the implications of this position as coming out most clearly with regard to the nativity accounts and declares: "The proper historical and theological evaluation of such stories requires that they be examined in the light of Easter and of the church's confession with respect to who Jesus really is." He notes that "what Matthew and Luke report about Christ's birth and infancy was not, during his ministry, public knowledge (cf. Lk. 2:19, 51b)." The "Christmas story" of Matthew and Luke "represents accounts from the viewpoint of believing Christians after Easter." He observes that "the gospel can be presented without any reference to the birth stories," witness the primitive kerygma, the source known as "Q," and the second and fourth gospels. In the church's calendar, Christmas, unlike Easter, is a third or fourth century development. Christmas and Christmas customs "have always been subject to many romantic influences and have tended to assimilate pagan practices," such as making what was originally a day of the sun-god the feast of Christ's nativity. The New Testament, apart from the first and third gospels, "assumed the full humanity of Jesus and assumes that

he was born, grew up, etc. on earth," but gives no details. Gal. 4:4, "born of woman," refers to his birth as a human being, "not to a virgin birth." But later the infancy of Christ was subject to more legends than most areas of His life. Nevertheless the material about Christ's birth in Matthew and Luke deserves attention. "If there are firsthand sources to be reckoned with," it is usually said "that Mary conveyed the information to Luke" (p. 139). But Luke has other sources about John the Baptist that he weaves in. "All the stories show a heavy influence from the Old Testament and doubtless bear the stamp of countless tellings" within Christian circles. "Matthew specifically calls Mary a virgin mother," but verse 25 and 13:55-56 indicate that "Mary and Joseph later had other children." The canticles in Lk. 1-2 "were probably used in early Christian worship before Luke recorded them." Jesus is presented "as virgin-born at 1:27 and 1:35. Such statements in Luke (and Matthew) are assertions of faith, affirming who Christians believe Jesus is, i.e., the son of God (see Lk. 3:38)" (p. 140). But Mark can make the "same confession without any (virgin) birth stories." Reumann summarizes: "All the nativity stories seek to describe what early Christians believed about Jesus. The stories might be called 'Christology in picture form'" (p. 141).

Frederick W. Danker, my colleague at Concordia Seminary, has written the most recent Lutheran commentary on St. Luke to be published in the United States, *Jesus and the New Age According to St. Luke: A Commentary on the Third Gospel* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1972). In the eyes of some, at least, it is not a "conservative" document. The editor of the Concordia Publishing House series for which it was originally designed, Walter J. Bartling, describes it as so pointedly relevant—"indeed, 'a scandal of relevance'—that it helped "precipitate the scuttling of the entire project" (p. xi). It may be noted, for instance, that on the basis of some older Latin manuscripts, part of the text tradition of St. Irenaeus,



and some copies of Luke cited by Origen and Nicetas, Danker ascribes the *Magnificat* to Elizabeth, although he acknowledges that there is "very substantial scholarly support" for the Blessed Virgin's authorship (p. 15). Nevertheless, Danker's commitment to the virginal conception of our Lord is unexcepting (p. 10 [on v. 27]: "Mary . . . was a *virgin* at the time of Gabriel's visit"; p. 13: "the evangelist here [v. 35] emphasizes *virginal conception*, not 'virgin-birth'"; p. 24: "[in 2:5-6] the phrase *his betrothed* reminds the reader that Mary stands in the same relation to Joseph as was stated earlier at 1:27"; p. 53: "Jesus was born of a *virgin*, fathered by the Spirit") (emphasis added).

#### IV. *A Recent Controversy*

After this survey of contemporary Lutheran systematic and exegetical opinion, I return to the investigation of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, that the president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod directed a specially appointed "fact-finding" committee to make. Part of the Seminary's problem has been that the synodical president did not either before the investigation or afterward communicate to the president of the Seminary or to the board of control of the school the specific charges which he stated that he had received from outside the Seminary against members of the faculty. As I indicated before, however, these charges allegedly included denial of Christ's virgin conception and birth.

By May 1972, when the class of seminarians of that year was about to be graduated, the investigation had been substantially completed, but no report on it had as yet come out.

On the threshold of their graduation, the members of the class of 1972 addressed a letter to the faculty expressing their gratitude for their now-completed seminary education and affirming their confidence in their teachers. This unprecedented action evoked a reply from the faculty that was subsequently published under the title "A Parting Peace." It affirmed in

its fourth part that "the facts of biblical history cannot be understood without the Holy Spirit. Without him to teach us, we might still retain all sorts of facts, but not as Gospel facts, hence not the facts of Scripture. We do run the danger of forgetting that. We tend to reduce the things which happened in biblical history—for example, Jesus' virgin birth or His resurrection or the Exodus—reduce them to where we can no longer see what really was happening there 'for us men and for our salvation.' All we have left then is the fact that this or that miracle took place. . . . Once we have stripped these facts of their real Gospel secret, what good does it do us to ask, 'Do you believe that they happened or don't you?' Of course they happened. But that does not require believing in any evangelical sense of faith. So the first question is not, 'Did it happen or didn't it?' No, the first question is, 'Did *what* happen?' For instance, what really happened when Jesus was born of a virgin? Or when he suffered, died, and was buried? What does it mean when the Large Catechism says, 'All this in order to become my Lord'? (The Creed, 310). Only as we first answer that question, discerning the lordship of Jesus in and through those events, do we thereby answer the other question ['Did it happen?'] in a way that really honors our Lord. That is possible only by faith in Christ, out of love for him. For, as Jesus says, in order to 'heed what I say' it is necessary first to 'love me.' And that is why he sends his Holy Spirit." (The Faculty of Concordia Seminary, *A Parting Peace* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1972) (8-page pamphlet), p. [5]).

On September 1, 1972, the synodical president reported to the church-body, in a 160-page brochure, on the report that he had received from his investigating committee. Under the rubric "Table of Divergent Positions Held by Various Members of the Faculty" the president noted: "All faculty members personally accept the *virgin birth* of Jesus Christ, but some express reluctance to pronounce an adverse judgment on someone



who denies it for exegetical reasons" (Jacob A. O. Preus, *Report of the Synodical President to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* [St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Syond, 1972], p. 31).

Under the rubric "Permissiveness: The Virgin Birth of Christ," the synodical president elaborated the briefer statement: "No evidence was found by the committee to indicate that the deity of Christ is not accepted and taught. However, several men expressed views concerning the virgin birth of Christ which fall short of condemning as false doctrine the denial of the real, historical event of the virgin birth as a biological miracle. The transcripts indicate that some members of the faculty would not label denial of the historical virgin birth as false doctrine unless this denial involved a denial of the deity of Christ or hurt the Gospel. There is in fact a reluctance in these cases to pronounce an adverse judgment on the denial of the virgin birth. There is also a tendency to talk of the virgin birth in theological terms without affirming faith in a historical (biological) virgin birth." He added the editorial observation: "This methodology *apparently* involves acceptance of the nonconfessional notion that faith can be separated from the historical events proclaimed in the Scriptures" (emphasis added) (p. 96). To document his assertions he quoted the transcripts of interviews conducted with six (out of forty-seven) teachers at the Seminary and a memorandum prepared for an interdepartmental discussion of the virgin birth.<sup>12</sup> The fifth professor, asked if a pastor

<sup>12</sup> The synodical president requested each faculty member to provide the "fact-finding" committee in advance of its individual interview with him with a bibliography of all materials that the interviewee had published in the preceding ten years and copies of all unpublished essays that he had presented in the preceding five years. Advance preparation by the faculty member for the interview, except in the most general way, was precluded, since he was not informed in advance what topics the committee would discuss with him or what questions it would ask. The interviews were conducted in a way that required impromptu answers from the interviewee to any question or topic which any of the five members chose

is free to deny the virgin birth, had declared that a pastor is not "free to take [the virgin birth theologically as pointing to some wonderful things] and ignore the historical dimensions of the event." A propos of this question, the interviewee submitted an explanatory statement to the summary of his interview: "I publicly teach that the virgin birth has both historical and theological dimensions. However, I am not sure that I would *a priori* exclude a fellow Christian who affirms the incarnation, redemptive death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but on certain exegetical grounds has misgivings about the virgin birth *per se*. This uncertainty [about *a priori* excluding a fellow Christian] is not something which I present in the classroom, but one which I discuss among my peers." The memorandum quoted in the synodical president's report as the final documentation had been prepared by the last of the six professors when he was at the Seminary as a guest professor three years before. It addressed itself to the narrow topic "Demythologization, *theologia crucis*, and Christ's Virgin Birth." In it he criticizes the "demythers" for denying the virgin birth on the ground that "the demythers frame their deliberations in the model of a *theologia gloriae*, and thus seriously (if not totally) reduce their chances for getting at what really happened—especially if what really happened was operating in terms of *theologia crucis*," as this professor, using Martin Luther's antithesis between *theologia crucis* and *theologia gloriae*, held. He stated that "there are no substantive

to follow. The report of the synodical president quoted the transcripts of the interviews in excerpt form to the extent that he felt that they illustrated the particular point that he was making in his report. The excerpts pertaining to *Permissiveness: The Virgin Birth of Christ* occur on pp. 96-103 of his report. Because of the impromptu nature of the responses, I am not quoting them in this essay. I am limiting myself to a statement which the fifth of the six professors subsequently submitted and to the prepared memorandum on which an interdepartmental discussion of the virgin conception and birth of Christ was based. In my view the evidence that the synodical president cited in his report falls short of establishing the charges that he made in this portion of his report.



biblical grounds for seeing a parthenogenetic birth as a conquest of [the Creator's] curse" of the law of sin and death. He declared that in his view the conviction of the New Testament writers that the real shattering of this curse comes through Christ's death and resurrection "leads them to give a low-key treatment to the virgin birth of our Lord, if they were even aware of it. This is true even of Matthew and Luke, despite the coverage they give it in their opening chapters. For them it was what they had received, and in their own unique witnessing they included it." He affirmed Werner Elert's thesis that the connection of the virgin birth with the incarnation "can only be found in the fact that the virgin 'knew not a man' (Lk. 1:34), that the conception of her child did not come from the 'will of man' (cf. Jn. 1:13), that consequently the God-man born of her has his origin *exclusively* in God (Lk. 1:48ff; Gal. 4:4)."

The president of Concordia Seminary, John H. Tietjen, reacted to the report of the synodical president by releasing a 35-page document entitled, *Fact Finding or Fault Finding?—An Analysis of President J. A. O. Preus' Investigation of Concordia Seminary* (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Seminary, 1972).

It calls attention to the fact that the second of the six teachers quoted in the report of the synodical president of the virgin birth issue had actually suggested a link between the gospel and our Lord's virgin conception: "When the house of David has been burned out like a 'stump,' [God] still raises it up as if *ex nihilo* his Messiah-King, from nothing. This is the way this God, this odd God, goes the way of the cross, raises up his redemptive regent. And the big accent in the Matthaean quoting of the Isaiah 7 [*parthenos*] accent here is to remind the people of the *new* covenant that from this lowly birth-origin God's own Son doesn't need a human father. God will do it His own way. This is the call for those who trusted, let's say, in paternity or in ethnic prestige, to be ground down

under the mills of God and to take God's salvation the way he gives it to them" (p. 16; compare Preus, *loc. cit.*, p. 98).

The Seminary president's report declares that "the virgin birth is part and parcel of what is good about the good news, [God's] stooping in mercy to our weak and lowly condition" (Tietjen, p. 15).

On the criticism that faculty members are guilty of "permissiveness" with reference to denials of the virgin birth the president of the Seminary observed: "The 'freedom' which professors are reported as giving to others must be understood in the contexts in which the words were spoken, [that is] pastoral dealings with people who had difficulties with the doctrine or issues of interpretation raised by other exegetes" (p. 25).<sup>13</sup>

In March 1972 the synodical president sent to the clergy, the Christian day school teachers, and the individual congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles* which, according to his covering letter, had as their purpose "to assist the board of control [of the Seminary] in identifying areas which need further attention in terms of the Synod's doctrinal position." He had continued: "The board of control may well request the faculty members of the St. Louis seminary to indicate their stance toward these guidelines." (In Preus, *op. cit.*, p. 152).

<sup>13</sup> As members of the faculty committee advising the president of the Seminary in this controversy, several professors were given the opportunity to comment at the end of the Seminary president's document on the way in which the synodical president's "fact-finding" committee had used their interviews. Three referred to views attributed to them on Christ's virgin conception and birth.

With reference to the virgin birth, the chairman of the department of systematic theology described as putting words in his mouth and as slanderous the "inference" that "if one does not regard [the virgin birth] as an ingredient of the gospel, a Lutheran theologian need not feel constrained to teach it." He charged the committee with falsification in insinuating that he would answer affirmatively "the question, may one then deny a teaching of scripture such as the virgin birth if one does not think it can be readily or intimately connected with the gospel?" (p. 28).



Under the rubric "The Infallibility of Scripture" the synodical president rejected the view "that only those aspects of a biblical statement need to be regarded as true that are in keeping with the alleged *intent* of the passage (for example . . . that the virgin birth of our Lord may be denied because the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke did not have the specific intent to discuss a biological miracle)." <sup>14</sup> (*Ibid.*, p. 154).

In November, the faculty adopted a series of "affirmations" (signed by forty-four of the forty-seven professors in residence) relating to the major issues in controversy. One "affirmation" reads: "For us [human beings, God's Son] was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and [was] born in Bethlehem, flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood, yet without sin" (The Faculty of Concordia Seminary, *Faithful to Our Calling—Faithful to Our Lord* [St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1973], part one, p. 6).

Then Seminary's vice-president for academic affairs at the time of the investigation noted that the committee cited him as indicating that "the 'how' of the virgin birth was not a doctrinal matter" and as saying that "he affirmed the virgin birth, but that it is possible that God could have used a married woman for the birth of Christ and still have impregnated her by means of the Holy Spirit." He declared in reply that in his view "the 'how' of a miracle should never become a doctrinal matter. As soon as we can explain the 'how' of a miracle it is no longer a miracle." He stated: "I know that Jesus of Nazareth was born of the virgin Mary. I do not know how this took place, nor understand all of the theological problems. In fact, that is not my business. That's God's business. He did it. He revealed the fact to me in Scripture. By the Spirit I believe it and accept it." Of the interview he said that "he had merely indicated that God could have carried out his purpose in other ways than a virgin birth and refused to be tied down by any 'human explanation' of a miracle, no [far?] less make it a doctrinal matter" (p. 31).

The director of placement and former dean of students saw the synodical president's fact-finding committee referring to him "on the subject of certifying a student who had trouble with the virgin birth." If this were indeed so, his "hesitation in responding was not over the doctrinal issue but over the way in which to deal with the student. I was concerned to treat him in a pastoral manner" (p. 32).

<sup>14</sup> I know of no member of the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, who holds the view here rejected.

### V. General Observations

In the controversy about the virgin conception of our Lord that is going on throughout Western Christendom, a problem obviously exists for all of us. That it exists for Roman Catholics is clear from the very fact that this annual meeting of the Mariological Society of America is addressing itself to the virginal conception controversy in the Roman Catholic community. That it exists for us Lutherans is equally obvious from what I have said so far.

What can a Lutheran say to a predominantly Roman Catholic audience about this problem?

First of all, he must affirm that the biblical, historical, and scientific data involved in the problem are not denominational matters. There are, admittedly, some areas which touch Roman Catholics, but which do not touch Lutherans, at least not with the same force. I think here of the doctrines of the perpetual virginity and of the immaculate conception of the Mother of God. The perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary was probably taken for granted quite generally by Lutheran theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and by many Lutheran theologians down to the present. Indeed, the official Latin translation (1584) of the Book of Concord by Nicholas Selnecker (1530-1592) declares in Part I, 4 of the Smalcald Articles that "the Son became a human being in such a way that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit without the cooperation of a male human being and was born out of Mary, the pure, the holy, the *ever-virgin* (*semper virgine*)" (emphasis added). But the Lutheran Church never elevated this opinion to a dogma and its theologians did not hereticize one another for affirming or denying it.

Again, the idea of an immaculate conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary would seem to a Lutheran to be of and by itself a tolerable theological opinion. But very few Lutherans have followed Martin Luther himself in affirming it. Nevertheless,



these are only differences of degree between Roman Catholics and Lutherans, not of kind.

Many of the detailed arguments that exegetes have raised with reference to the virgin conception of our Lord are obviously conjectures that cannot be verified. Yet some of the data are inescapably solid.

It is true—for all of us—that, except for the first and third gospels, there is no clear and incontestable reference to the virginal conception of Christ in the New Testament.

It is true—for all of us—that the two infancy accounts are "virtually irreconcilable,"<sup>15</sup> and that both accounts seem to exhibit a literary adaptation of the source material to the particular theological purpose of each evangelist.

It is true—for all of us—that as late as St. Justin and Origen there were Christians of Jewish background that did not affirm Christ's virginal conception.

It is true—for all of us—that the findings of modern genetics make the virginal conception of Christ even more "miraculous" (and hence more scandalous) than it seemed to the scientific knowledge of the more distant past.

But it is also true—for all of us—that the relevant biblical data in the first and third gospels, in spite of the differences of their contexts, do agree that the Blessed Virgin Mary by an intervention of the Holy Spirit conceived our Lord without the cooperation of a male human being, and nothing in the Sacred Scriptures necessarily contradicts this concordant teaching of the first and the third gospels. On the other hand, the fact of a virginal conception of our Lord would facilitate the understanding of certain other passages of the Sacred Scriptures and deepen their meaning.

It is also true—for all of us—that this is the singularly con-

<sup>15</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Problem of the Virginal Conception of Jesus*, in *Theological Studies*, 33 (1972), 24. Compare Stendahl, *op. cit.*, p. 96: "[The] difference [between the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke] are more drastic than anywhere [else] in the canonical gospels."

sistent conviction of the Great Church. This is the teaching of the Creed of the 150 Fathers ("Nicene Creed") that all of historic Christendom, Eastern, and Western, has made its eucharistic confession of faith. It is implied by the Symbol *Whoever Will Be Saved* ("Athanassian Creed"). It is affirmed by the developed baptismal creed of the West ("Apostles' Creed"). As a Catholic and as a Lutheran, I am committed to these creeds. Thus I confess the virginal conception of Christ because the Sacred Scriptures, which I believe to be the written word of God, assert it and because the witness of the Catholic Church instructs me that I have correctly understood the biblical data.

I should also regard it as necessary to emphasize that, as a Lutheran, I must regard any explanation for the alleged necessity of the virginal conception of our Lord as a theological construction. It is not my task as a theologian to ask if God might have accomplished the reconciliation of the human race in some other way than he actually did. That kind of speculation is unprofitable.

Again, a virginal conception is not the prerequisite for Christ's deity. If for us men and for our redemption our Lord Jesus Christ clothed himself with our flesh by the Holy Spirit out of the virginal Mary, I am willing to let the fact stand as a divine determination. *The* miracle is the Incarnation—a greater miracle, John Gerhard, the archtheologian of the Lutheran Church, observes, than creating the universe out of nothing. The virginal conception of Christ is a lesser included miracle that dramatizes for me the divine initiative. It is so that I read the *dio* of St. Luke 1:35—*because* of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Blessed Virgin and the overshadowing of the power of the Most High, the Child that was to be born of her should be called, with all the force that *kaleô* has in biblical Greek, holy and the Son of God.

I can understand why another age and past theologians might have seen in the virginal conception of Christ the effec-



tive means in our Lord's case of breaking the destructive cycle of native sinfulness that marks all human beings. Convinced as they were about the basic sinfulness of intercourse between a man and a woman, even within holy matrimony, a virginal conception for the sinless Son of God might have seemed necessary. The common idea of the past about the role of woman in procreation, which made her merely the passive environment from which the homunculus within the male spermatozoon gestated and drew its nutriment and grew to infancy, was favorable to the idea of a virginal conception as a way of insuring a sinless offspring. But we know more than the past did. We know that the mother contributes as much to the child-to-be as the father in terms of inheritance. We cannot hold that the conjugal act is intrinsically sinful. In other words, we do not need a virginal conception to have a sinless redeemer.

I remind myself from time to time that when I say the creed in its original Greek it comes out a little more explicitly that I am committing myself not to an event or an action or an episode, but to a person. The English language is a poor vehicle to express this fact in simple fashion in a creed. In the past we have been using a relative clause: "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary." (In so doing, the English translators were merely mimicking the Latin form, of course, "*qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem descendit de coelis et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria virgine.*") The new agreed text uses a simple indicative for the verbs and rewrites the text: "For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the virgin Mary." But the original Greek uses participles, that is, qualifying verbal adjectives, throughout—at this point *katelthonta* and *sarkôthenta*. "We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ . . . come down from heaven for us human beings and for our salvation, *made flesh out of the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin*, and made man, crucified

on our behalf under Pontius Pilate and executed and buried and risen and ascended and seated at the Father's right hand and coming again." It is thus that the virginal conception becomes for me part of the Gospel, because it is part of the picture of Christ set forth in the Sacred Scriptures and affirmed in the creed of the Catholic Church.<sup>16</sup>

There is one point that Father Raymond Brown makes that I want especially to underline: "As we discuss Mary's virginity, we must assure all those ordinary people in our churches, the 'little people' who happen to be God's people, that in our quest we 'experts' have not forgotten that we too must obey the biblical injunction (Lk. 1:48) that all generations, even this 'nosey' generation, shall call her blessed." I probably should not have used precisely his words, but I share his concern, the concern that we do not give scandal—to anyone. On the one hand, we need to be careful that we do not add to the already sufficiently "scandalous" nature of the gospel by setting forth as divine doctrine the speculations of human beings. On the other, we need to formulate both our theological questions and our theological convictions in such a way that we do not put in bad faith honest Christians who believe as they do because we or our predecessors before us have so taught them. But we who are called to the theological enterprise cannot re-

<sup>16</sup> In a Seminary chapel address on the Feast of the Annunciation of the B.V.M. in 1971, published in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 42 (1971), 408-410, I made the point that in the Lukan account St. Gabriel came to the Mother of God as he came to Daniel in the Old Covenant, "with another message of divine victory. This Child will accomplish the saving purpose for which He came into the world, 'to destroy the works of the devil' (1 Jn. 3:8) or, if you prefer the language of Dan. 9, to insure that 'the decreed end is poured out on the desolator,' the desolator par excellence (Dan. 9:27). Just as God's victory in Dan. 8 and 9 is final and decisive, so is his victory in Christ. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever. Of His kingdom—a phrase that the church carefully worked into the Creed of the 150 Fathers that we say before the altar—there shall be no end! (Lk. 1:32-33)."



nounce it and hope that the problems will go away. They will not, in this issue or elsewhere. At the same time, we cannot expose ourselves to the charge of intellectual cowardice by refusing to face the real problems realistically and by thus refusing to exercise the theological leadership that is our vocation.

Let me close with two quotations.

The first quotation is from the final paragraph of an essay on the Lukan account of the first Christmas, an essay as perceptive as it is devout, by a Lutheran New Testament scholar, Karl Heinrich Rengsdorf (born 1903) of Münster. He offered the essay in tribute of Hanns Lilje, bishop of Hannover and abbot of Loccum, on the latter's 60th birthday. The quotation reads: "[Mary] remained 'the handmaid of the Lord,' the role for which God had chosen her and to which she had dedicated herself, and never played a role of her own. For that reason she does not have an independent significance for the salvation of the world. But it is also true that *no one can tread the way to salvation unless he associates himself with the mother of Jesus, who was the first to tread that way. From her it is possible to learn in a very special fashion what it means to belong to Jesus and in that belonging to be a believer and to be comforted.* As certainly as the Christmas story of the gospel according to Luke does not want to say only this, it is equally certain that it is concerned to attest this fact also" (emphasis added).<sup>17</sup>

The other is from an ancient father who is part of both our histories—St. Celestine, bishop of Rome from 422 to 432. In a fragment of an address to the synod of Rome of the year 430 preserved in Arnobius, St. Celestine said: "I remember

<sup>17</sup> *Die Weihnachtserzählung des Evangelisten Lukas*, in Georg Hoffmann and Karl Heinrich Rengsdorf, editors, *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis: Eine Festschrift für Landesbischof D. Hanns Lilje, Abt zu Loccum, zum sechzigsten Geburtstag am 20. August 1959* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1959), p. 30.

that on the anniversary of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, Ambrose of blessed memory made all the people sing with one voice to God: 'Veni, redemptor gentium,/ ostende partum virginis;/ miretur omne saeculum;/ talis decet partus Deum! [Come, O Redeemer of the earth,/ And manifest your virgin birth,/ Let every age adoring fall!/ Such birth befits the God of all!]' Did he say, 'Such birth befits a human being?' [No!] Therefore, the intention of our brother Cyril [of Alexandria] when he calls Mary *theotokos* [Mother of God] agrees very well with 'Such birth befits the God of all!' It is God whom the virgin brought forth in her child-bearing enabled by him who is full of omnipotence."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Migne, *Patrologia latina* 50, 457. The English translation of the hymn stanza is adapted from that of "J[ohn] M[ason] Neale and others" as reproduced in Percy Dearmer, general editor, *The English Hymnal with Tunes: 1933* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), No. 14, p. 22.